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ABSTRACT

Australia's Occupational English Test (OET) for health professionals was developed in response to the need for immigrant health professions workers to have increased awareness of Australian colloquialisms, improved language training, both in general and within the professions, and cultural awareness training. The test assesses speaking, reading, listening, and writing skills and is delivered on behalf of 11 professional organizations. Candidates must reach a satisfactory performance level in all sections before the organizations will support immigration applications and before acceptance into professional courses and/or practice in Australia. The reading and listening components are generic to all health occupations. The writing component requires the candidate to write a referral letter based on supplied case notes. The speaking component requires the candidate to participate in two role-plays (based on profession) with an interlocutor. The test is conducted in major cities and in some overseas locations. All examination materials are returned to Australia for assessment. A candidate must pass all four test sections, but not necessarily in the same sitting. Application and retest fees are assessed. A contact person's name and address are provided. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Language Australia

The National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia Limited

THE DIGEST

of Australian languages and literacy issues

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Ann Latchford, Language Australia

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Occupational English Test for Health Professionals

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In early February 1991, the administration of the Occupational English Test (OET) was transferred from the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition within the Department of Employment, Education and Training to Language Australia. The OET replaces an English test used in medicine which was based largely on knowledge of English literature. The OET's development for application in medicine was based on a survey of overseas qualified doctors, discussions with peers, other professionals and lecturers, and especially on observation of workplaces including hospital casualty departments and surgeries.

This exhaustive process confirmed the importance of effective communication with patients. Specifically, it highlighted the need for:

- increased awareness of Australian colloquialisms;
- provision of English language training by language educators;
- cultural awareness training; and
- language training provided in conjunction with professional skills bridging courses.

What is the Occupational English Test?

The OET was developed to assess English language proficiency in the health professions of candidates seeking admittance to training programs and professional examinations. The test assesses speaking, reading, listening and writing skills and is delivered on behalf of eleven professional bodies including the Australian Medical Association. Candidates must reach a satisfactory level in all sections before professional bodies will support a migration application and before being considered for acceptance into courses and/or professional practice in Australia.

The reading and listening components of the test are generic to all OET candidates irrespective of their professions.

Reading (Non-profession Specific)

Two articles relating to health issues are selected from general professional journals in the medical or scientific fields. Candidates must answer ten questions per article designed to gauge their understanding of the text. The test format is multiple choice and candidates are required to record their answers on computer sheets. This section of the test lasts sixty minutes.

Listening (Non-profession Specific)

Candidates listen to two cassette recordings of speeches on health issues. Written questions are formulated to test candidates' comprehension of the spoken word. Pauses at appropriate moments during the speeches allow for written responses. This section of the test usually runs for approximately sixty minutes.

Writing (Profession Specific)

The writing component of the OET requires candidates to write a letter of referral based on supplied case notes. Candidates may write as much as desired, however, only the first twenty-five lines of a letter are assessed. The time allowed for this part of the test is forty minutes.

Speaking (Profession Specific)

Candidates are required to participate in two role plays with an interlocutor. The role plays differ according to profession although the purpose of this section of the examination is not to test candidates' professional knowledge. Rather the tests are designed to assess the ability to communicate in 'real life situations'.

If the interlocutor is trained in assessment techniques an assessment is made during the role plays.

Otherwise the assessment is made after the test from cassette recordings by a trained assessor.

Where is the OET Conducted In Australia?

The OET is conducted in all major cities in Australia and, in most cases, is held in universities, institutes of technology and TAFE colleges.

Where is the OET Conducted Overseas?

The OET is conducted overseas in Australian diplomatic offices and is the responsibility of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs or the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as the test represents an integral part of the migration process.

Offices able to conduct the test are found in approximately fifty countries world wide and include Jordan, Turkey, Thailand, Egypt, Denmark, Switzerland and Spain. Generally, the OET is administered at thirty-six to thirty-eight embassies/consulates twice a year.

Assessment of the OET

All examination material is returned to Language Australia and assessment is arranged in the following manner:

Reading: Computer test sheets are analysed by computer at the University of Sydney;

Listening: The written sections are assessed by trained assessors;

Writing: The mock letter of referral is assessed by trained assessors; and

Speaking: If a trained interlocutor was not present at the test the cassette tapes are assessed by trained assessors.

The assessment and subsequent posting of results to candidates takes approximately eight to ten weeks. Upon receipt of their results, candidates are allowed a period of ten days in which to request a re-mark of any section they may have failed.

Re-sitting the OET

A candidate must pass all four sections of the OET, however, this need not be achieved in one sitting if the candidate is sitting for the test in Australia. Candidates need only re-sit the failed sections.

However, as of the April 1995 test, and beyond, candidates sitting for the OET in countries other than Australia, who are required to undertake an OET as part of the qualifications assessment process will only be permitted one chance at the test. This means that applicants will not be permitted to re-sit the OET if they have passed some but not all sections of the test.

If applicants wish to sit for another OET they must lodge a new migration application. If they have passed some, but not all the sections of a previous OET they may sit for only the outstanding sections unless more than twelve months have passed since they last sat for the test. If twelve months, or more, have passed candidates must re-sit the entire test.

When is the OET Conducted?

In 1997, the OET will be conducted every six months, in early March and mid September.

OET Statistics

In 1996, 1850 candidates applied to sit for the OET in any one of the eleven nominated health professions (see below). Approximately one-third of all candidates sitting the test were medical practitioners.

Fees for the OET

For the 1997 OET the application fee for a candidate sitting for the OET in Australia is $300Aus; re-sitting $75Aus per skill and re-marking $40Aus per skill.

The fee charged to candidates wishing to sit for the OET in countries other than Australia is $350Aus, to be paid either in Australian or US dollars; re-sitting $90Aus per skill and re-marking $40Aus per skill.

Should a situation occur where the cost to Language Australia is in excess of $350Aus per candidate then a prospective candidate may be requested to pay an additional charge.

With acknowledgment of the application a candidate receives a sample kit, a listening tape and a speaking tape designed to assist in appropriate preparation. Additional materials can be bought for $40Aus.

Health Professions that Recognise the OET

Medical practitioner
Dentists
Nurses
Physiotherapists
Occupational therapists
Speech pathologists
Veterinarians
Dietitians
Radiographers
Podiatrists
Pharmacists, as from March 1994.

The management and administration of the OET are funded by Language Australia.

For Further Information, Please Contact

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